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## Documenting Dalit History and Culture: An Alternative Reading of the *Ramayana*

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### Introduction

'Dalit' has emerged as a potent nomenclature of the marginalized. From its most specific reference to the outcastes, the term has been expanded to include different sections of generally oppressed people with no clear consensus as to the range of its applicability. Accordingly, the voice of the dalits that is now audible is anything but unitary and homogenous. However, certain basic tendencies and approaches characterize Dalit thinking. One such feature is the deconstruction of dominant texts and ideologies to record a Dalit standpoint. The scope of my paper is to examine dalit approach to Valmiki's *Ramayana* with special focus on the characters and incidents that have been re-interpreted and re-told. My objective is to explore the connection between the dalit interpretation of this prominent epic and their assertion of separate identity with their own history and culture.

### Dalit Voice

Segregated on account of their birth and livelihood, the outcastes or untouchables have for a long time remained absent from the mainstream society. It was in the twentieth century that their efforts to break the shackles of years of abject servitude came to limelight with their presence being increasingly felt in political, cultural and literary fields, under the nomenclature 'dalit'. A signal aspect of this attempt to counter the saga of oppression and establish their separate identity is to re-read the books and scriptures sacred to Hinduism from a Dalit standpoint. One such book is *Ramayana*, the earliest Indian epic. It celebrates the noble ideals put forward by Ayodhya ruler Rama, who has gradually come to be worshipped by the Hindus as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

### *Ramayana*: Valmiki's version and after

Initially an oral epic, *Ramayana* is believed to have been conceived much before it was composed in Sanskrit by Valmiki, believed to be the adikavi or the First Poet in this regard. Since then it has been translated and re-written into various languages and formats, some of which, e.g. the Jain tellings, have departed radically from Valmiki's composition. So much so, that Paula Richman in this era of post structuralism considers it no longer proper to look upon Valmiki's version as the definitive or canonical text. "His text represents an intriguing telling, but it is one among many." (Richman, *Many Ramayanas* 9)

### Looking through Dalit Eyes

The tradition of alternative readings of *Ramayana* received a fresh boost with the arrival of dalit writers. Leading writers and activists like Dr Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule, E. V. Ramaswami Periyar and more recently Kancha Ilaiah have, in their own ways decried Valmiki's Hindu text.

The very rendition of *Ramayana* in Sanskrit slokas is not agreeable to the dalits. All scriptures of Hinduism like the Vedas and Upanishads are originally composed in Sanskrit, venerated as a sacred language by the ancient Hindu tradition. Beyond the reach of the outcastes, Sanskrit thus is seen as embodying the monopoly of the Brahmins. This feeling is especially strong among the dalits of South India. Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam i.e. the four South Indian languages belong to the Dravidian language family and share linguistic features that distinguish them from the Indo-European language family that predominates in North India, to which Sanskrit belongs. Moreover, *Ramayana* celebrates the Ayodhya prince Rama's conquering Ravana's kingdom of Lanka, a territory that has been linked with South India or Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka. (Richman, *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India*<sup>14</sup>) Valmiki's *Ramayana* thus is found lauding the extermination of South Indian Dravidian culture by North Indian Brahmins who vaunted their superiority as Aryans.

The characters accordingly appear in a completely different light. Rama becomes a prototype of the Aryan invaders whose behaviour and actions are subjected to critical examination. Those who are held guilty and punished by this 'Lord' are seen as innocent sufferers, bearing out through their downfall the saga of dalit oppression. The chief antagonist, the ten-headed rakshas Ravana, is portrayed as an indigenous king of Lanka. His death at the hands of Rama, celebrated in Ramlila performances in Dusshera, is mourned by the dalits as the termination of a valiant and final resistance to Aryan aggression. In a similar vein, some minor characters gain much prominence in dalit interpretations. Bali, the tribal ruler of Kiskindha, unfairly killed by Rama from behind a tree to win an ally in his conquest of Lanka is a case in point. Besides, Rama's beheading of Shambuka, a Shudra ascetic for performing 'tapasya' or penance, an exclusive privilege of the upper castes, has drawn much flak from dalit writers. Last but not the least, Rama's wife Sita as a suffering woman, is an eternal dalit. Dalit writers are livid about Rama's testing her purity through an ordeal of fire and abandoning her during her pregnancy.

### **Assertion of Dalit History and Culture**

Reading *Ramayana* from the viewpoint of the defeated and the subjugated, brings to the fore an alternative, pre-Aryan civilization, to which the dalits trace their history and lineage. They identify themselves as the original inhabitants of India, rendered dalit or subdued all these years by Indo-Europeans or Aryans. They assimilate their own history and culture as an antithesis to the dominant ideology and values.

The Dalits are basically an eco people, living in close communion with nature, unlike the Aryan outsiders who willy-nilly sacrifice trees and animals at the altar of Yajnas and other Brahminic rituals. As the king of Ayodhya, both Dasharath and his son Rama perform ashvamedha yajna to expand their kingdom. An important royal ritual which recurs in the Vedas and epics, it is viewed as bearing testimony to the Indo-European history of land-grabbing and plundering of natural resources. Rama and Laxmana's 'vanvas' or sojourn into the forest is an encroachment into the natural habitat of the indigenous population. Their resistance to the degradation of natural environment by foreign intruders causes them to be labelled derogatorily as rakshasas, rakshasis and asuras. Dr. Ambedkar in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* observes: "Much of the ancient history of India is no history at all. Not that ancient India has no history. It has plenty of it. But it has lost its character. It has been made mythology to amuse women and children." Scoffing at the preposterous identity ascribed to them by their oppressors, Dr. Ambedkar proclaims these

rakshasas and asuras to be “members of the human family and not monsters.” (Part1, Chapter1)

Reading ancient Indian history in a new light they uncover the adi-image, their original, unbroken state of existence. Thus, the ten heads of Ravana are found to represent ten indigenous groups of people, epitomizing the cumulative valour of the Dalits. “The symbolic meaning of the killing of Ravana with ten heads is the subjugation of all the ten groups of native people who lived in India when the Aryans arrived.” (Raj, 68-69). Their society was essentially casteless and spread over large part of ancient India, as exemplified by the kingdom of Bali, elaborately discussed in Phule’s *Slavery*. Baliraja is an epitome of righteousness who never attacked his enemy from behind and always stood by the downtrodden before falling victim to a treacherous assault. The dalits thus give a clarion call to work towards re-establishing the egalitarian society such as the one in which Bali was the leader. ( Ilaiah 82) The mythology of Baliraja finds expression in a Marathi folk song whose English translation begins as “let all troubles and miseries go, and the kingdom of Bali come”.

As eco people they are attuned to mother earth. Unlike the dominant notion of looking up to the heavens, the abode of imaginary gods, the daily life of the dalits is earth-centric. They relate deeply to Earth as mother and celebrate her fertility cycle closely relating that to the creative cycle of their women. This accords primacy to women in dalit tradition, a clear contrast to the patriarchal bias of the dominant society typified by Ramrajya. In *Why I am Not a Hindu*, Kancha Ilaiah, finds the Hindu goddesses playing second fiddle as wives and partners of the more active and powerful male gods while dalit deities are mostly single women, independent of male associate. Surpanakha, Tataka are examples of independent, indigenous queens, whose mutilation and murder signify the advent of male domination. This is paralleled in the tribulations of Ram’s loyal wife Sita. Her link with the dalits is further emphasized by the fact that she is found in a furrow when king Janak ploughed the land to stop drought. Sita is thus a daughter of the earth in whose womb she eventually finds refuge.

These indigenous inhabitants of India were enlightened beings, much advanced in knowledge and learning. Besides the Shudra ascetic Shambuka, Ravana, a follower of Shiva, is well versed in scriptures. *Ramayana* itself is composed in Sanskrit slokas by a dalit sage, Valmiki. It is in the ashram of Valmiki, a holistic centre of learning, that Sita stays and raises her sons after she is compelled to leave Ayodhya on suspicion of infidelity. This testifies to the dalits being highly learned and useful, as Dr. Ambedkar puts it: “The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu.

The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable.

The Hindus wanted a Constitution, and they sent for me.” (qtd. in Zelliott 317)

As the author of the sanskritic, brahminic text *Ramayana*, the dalit Valmiki is a glaring instance of the artful cooption of a section of the dalits to facilitate their oppression. So is Hanuman, the ever-faithful monkey of Lord Rama. Himself a South Indian Dalit he fought against the nationalist ruler Ravana, only to find a subservient place in Ramrajya, “an anti-Dalitbahujan and anti-women kingdom.” (Ilaiah 58-59). Voicing dalit sentiments Daya Pawar declares in a song “We Are Not Your Monkeys” and his poem ‘Oh Great Poet’ is critical of Valmiki for “singing the praises of Ramrajya”. (qtd. in Zelliott 320-21) On the other hand, doubts remain whether the available version is the authentic, original work, which again may have been composed by more than one man bearing the surname Valmiki. (*Ramayana of Valmiki*) Thus, besides countering the Brahminical version and re-writing their own, there is

also a parallel search to recover from the mass of later additions and interpolations, the actual work of Valmiki.

### Concluding Observations

The different strands of dalit re-reading of *Ramayana* thus unearth an ancient, highly developed civilization that was appropriated, co-opted and eventually subjugated. It has been subsequently identified as Indus Valley civilization described by historians and archaeologists as pre-Aryan and having indigenous origin which flourished in the cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa before 1500B.C. (Massey). Inverting the dominant narrative, Dalits lay claim to a document of their bygone times, highlighting their culture and tradition. *Ramayana*, the earliest Indian epic, presumably written by a dalit, thus bears testimony to their pre-dalit existence, the subsequent process of their dalitization, and recurs as a subject of dalit literature and folklore that look forward to a day when they will shed their dalit identity and regain their original, unbroken existence.

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